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Sen. Alfonse D'Amato left New York Thursday for Rome to investigate the circumstances behind the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II.

The New York Republican, speaking before his flight left from Kennedy International Airport about 7 p.m., said he was undertaking the mission in his capacity as a member of the Helsinki Commission. The group monitors violations of human rights.

D'Amato said his investigation would focus on whether the Soviet government played a role in the assassination plot.

"I think it has been established more clearly than ever that the Bulgarians were deeply involved with (convicted papal assailant Mehmet Ali) Agca," he said.

"If that can be conclusively demonstrated, then it would provide a very clear indication that the Soviets were aware of what was taking place," D'Amato said. "Bulgaria has had a history of doing nothing without the consent and support of the (Soviet) KGB."

The senator said he planned to spend five days in Rome and had a commitment from the "Italian intelligence community" to provide him with information.

D'Amato said the CIA reacted tepidly when he provided them with information from Vatican sources last October that Pope John Paul II had sent a letter to then-Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev saying the pope might visit Poland if Soviet troops invaded his homeland.

"My trip is not encouraged by certain members of the American intelligence community," D'Amato said. "They would rather that my investigation was set aside because they feel it might be embarrassing and detrimental to East-West relationships."

"But the American people have a right to know the facts and nothing is going to dissuade me from this investigation," he said.